

Is American culture a sustainability problem?

Can someone's culture be artificially blinding, making it difficult for that individual to respect and understand global crises? Has the culture of consumerism made it difficult for Americans to comprehend the extent to which we impact the Earth's ecosystem? These questions are of increasing relevance and concern in our society. If it is true that Americans are blind to our ecological responsibility then it behooves us to determine where we are inept and alter our actions for the benefit of all stakeholders. This begs the question: Who are the stakeholders in American culture and how it affects global sustainability? The people affected are those living in areas which supply America with goods. They are also the people living close to the U.S. or any land where the U.S. is responsible for pollution and resource consumption. Stakeholders include the individuals, businesses, and governments which profit from consumerism in America. If flora and fauna may be considered stakeholders then the biota which exist in the affected regions are clearly stakeholders as well. In short, it would appear that all of Earth's inhabitants can be considered relevant to this issue.

Ronald Reagan addressed America's culture of consumerism in his official announcement for presidential candidacy.^[1] He claimed that the U.S. is a country "unimpressed by what others say is impossible, and always impatient to provide a better life for its people." He insisted at the time that nothing compared "with the need to restore the health of the American economy and the strength of the American dollar." At the time the U.S. was in the throes of the energy crisis of the 1970s, resulting in scarce oil and inflation. American dependence on foreign oil had a crippling effect on the country. In 1973 Arab members of OPEC enacted an embargo on the western world in protest of America's decision to continue supporting the Israeli military.^[2] Reagan used this opportunity to inspire Americans into his political camp. He made it clear that Americans "must decide that 'less' is not enough, [that] we must make use of technological advantages we possess." He was appealing to the human instinct, reassuring the American people that consumerism was acceptable. Although the habit of excessive growth had put our country in a vulnerable position Reagan was saying American culture was not at fault but that the Carter administration was. Reagan reassured Americans that economic growth was a possibility with increased "domestic production of oil and gas." In his statement he also focused on other issues beyond the scope of the energy crisis.

Fueled by the embargo of 1973 and the 1979 panic of oil scarcity due to Ayatollah Khomeini's rise to power, Reagan proposed that the American government work closely with Canada and Mexico. He guaranteed that "developing closeness would serve notice on friends and foe alike that we were prepared for a long haul, looking outward again and confident of our future; that together we [were] going to create jobs, to generate new fortunes of wealth for many and provide a legacy for the children of each of our countries." He was reiterating the vigor with which he wanted American consumerism to blossom. Presumably he felt consumerism was a necessity for strengthening our currency. In fact he claimed that "the productivity of our industry [was] surpassed by virtually all major nations who [competed] with us for world markets," and that "our currency was no longer the stable measure of value" it had been. Reagan's rhetoric was laced with an undertone of consumerism, nationalism, and a subtle but present air of defensiveness.

Due to the impact of the Arab world on America Reagan carefully, but definitively stated that it was the job of the U.S. government to protect Western idealizations. He acknowledged “we [had] spent large amounts of money and much of our time [in the name of] protecting and defending freedom all over the world.” He supported these actions by asking: “If we do not accept the responsibilities of leadership, who will? And if no one will, how will we survive?” In office Reagan acted on this sentiment by taking defensive action against the USSR, “[continuing] the B-1 Lancer program and producing the MX missile.”^[3] While Reagan likely thought he was acting in the interest of American people he set the groundwork for future hardship rather than prosperity.

In his official announcement for his presidential candidacy Reagan failed to consider several details. For one, the U.S. had already seen peak oil production 8 years earlier in 1971.^[1] This meant that his hope for increased domestic oil production was nothing more than a pipe dream, an unachievable fantasy. And while Reagan warned that energy would eventually need to come from sustainable sources he urged people to continue consuming energy at the rate at which they had been. This is the epitome of political ineptitude. How can it be intelligent to encourage increased consumption of a resource when it is recognized that the resource in question will be limiting in the future? With regard to Reagan’s remarks on U.S. militarism, why is it the responsibility of the U.S. government to secure domestic belief abroad? He recognized that much of the federal income had been spent in wars supposedly “protecting and defending freedom.” He also advocated for decreased government spending. Here we are with more juxtaposition. At this point it would be laughable to remind the reader that Reagan referenced the 10th article of the Bill of Rights, the federal government is only supposed to act on what is called for in the constitution. If the constitution outlines the federal government’s only responsibilities, than surely the government is not responsible for protecting or defending the freedom of others. And if the federal government is protecting or defending the freedom of non-subjects, it surely isn’t acting in the interest of the people. We have seen time and again how hated the American government is for its meddling in the affairs of other states.^[4] It would therefore stand to reason that by coming to the aid of others the federal government is only putting the American people in the crosshairs, thereby not fulfilling its duty to protect the very subjects it serves. Luckily Ronald Reagan’s opinion isn’t the only one regarding this issue.

Naomi Klein presented a talk entitled *Addicted to Risk* at a TEDWomen conference in 2010.^[5] The subject of her talk was greatly focused on consumerism in America and globally. Ms. Klein’s message was very different from that of our past president. She began with the recklessness with which companies conduct business, specifically referencing the environmental disaster following the explosion on the Deepwater Horizon. She said that while we were being fooled into believing 75% of the oil magically disappeared within a short time, the problem was still unfolding by working its way up the food chain. Ms. Klein went on to reference one of the most important works of American literature. She reminded us that “Rachel Carson -- the godmother of modern environmentalism -- warned us about this very thing back in 1962.” She also made another statement, one far more powerful, one in contradiction to those made by Reagan. Ms. Klein commented that “after telling ourselves for so long that our tools and technology can control nature, suddenly we were face-to-face with our weakness, with our lack of control.” Whereas Reagan was promising eternal prosperity Ms. Klein was showing us reality:

consumerism is not sustainable. It is chilling to realize that “as a culture, we have become far too willing to gamble with things that are precious and irreplaceable, and to do so without a back-up plan, without an exit strategy.” Coincidentally Ms. Klein makes the case that America has been all too willing to enter wars without proper foresight or planning, leading to “years of deadly damage control.”

For years we have heard the opposing claims, those who feel it is our moral imperative to reverse the human-related causes of global warming, and those who regard global warming as a ploy. Ms. Klein does not argue this debate, but rather approaches it from the side. She mentions Evelyn Fox Keller, an MIT physicist who asks “‘What if those scientists are right?’ Given the stakes, the climate crisis clearly calls for us to act based on the precautionary principle -- the theory that holds that when human health and the environment are significantly at risk and when the potential damage is irreversible, we cannot afford to wait for perfect scientific certainty.” This is again in contrast to the beliefs Reagan held in the early 80s. Instead of continuing consumption at the current rate in hopes that a solution will poke its head around some miraculous corner, Ms. Klein maintains that it’s better to err on the side of caution.

In early 2010 an article was written in *The Guardian* warning us of our current trends toward increased consumption.^[6] The author Suzanne Goldenberg, warns the reader that “the cult of consumption and greed could wipe out any gains from government action on climate change or a shift to a clean energy economy.” Worse still, Ms. Goldenberg argues that our culture has spread to other countries where materialism is now seen as a measure of success. For example, she points out that China has now surpassed the U.S. as the world’s largest car market. This is what we want, to be trendsetters of poor judgment that passes to the rest of the developing world in the guise of crowning achievements?

Ms. Goldenberg mentions an alarming statistic, that in order to combat our current rates of consumption, “the world needs to erect 24 wind turbines an hour to produce enough energy to replace fossil fuel.” Is the answer really some Quixotic nightmare in which our land fills with windmills? What happens when the usable land is used up? What about the energy which is required to produce the windmills? While Ms. Goldenberg is not quoting these figures as a suggestion of a potential solution, I fear someone reads these figures and analyzes the feasibility of erecting these 24 windmills per hour. It is not simply enough to say an alternative will appear. In order to effectively combat the global trends of eradicating resources and polluting ourselves to death, we must change how we behave. Perhaps this means no yearly vacations to Aruba, or no TV, or driving wherever, whenever we feel like it. But would this be such a bad thing? Civilizations existed for millennia prior to the invention of the automobile or telephone or television. In fact, these inventions are only just over a century old. Are we really willing to accept the ruination of civilization because we are unable to exist without modern consumerism? It isn’t going to be an easy solution, but it is a solution which requires everyone to make a conscious effort.

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